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ABSTRACT

Publicity and media relations are basic operations for many public relations practitioners. Establishing a good relationship with the media and getting positive publicity for the sponsoring organization are essential duties for most public relations professionals. The public relations practitioner needs to know how to prepare media kits; to work with printers, photographers, and vendors; to prepare executives for media interviews; to distribute materials to the media; and to plan for and conduct press conferences. Public relations students need to know that the media's sometimes suspicious attitudes toward public relations practitioners are predictable, healthy, and demand professional respect. By planning and preparing media kits, students can better understand the process and function of effective publicity and media relations. The activities involved in preparing the media kits could include: interviewing a public relations person who has a formal role preparing media kits, surveying public relations sources, and surveying journalists. By using student-produced media kits, students can prepare for and conduct mock press conferences. Three figures are included: (1) Do's and Don'ts for Effective Publicity and Media Relations; (2) Ground rules for executives being interviewed; and (3) Checklist for conducting a press conference. (MG)

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TEACHING PUBLICITY AND MEDIA RELATIONS

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Publicity and media relations are bread-and-butter operations for many public relations practitioners. Establishing a good relationship with the media and getting positive publicity for the sponsoring organization are essential duties for most public relations professionals.

This means the public relations practitioner needs, among other technical skills, to know how to prepare media kits; work with printers, photographers, vendors; prepare executives for media interviews; distribute materials to the media; plan for and conduct press conferences.

This means the public relations practitioner needs to keep in mind the various perspectives different people will bring to any one public relations activity. For example, many media professionals view public relations activities with suspicion--and that's okay. Public relations students need to know that the media's attitudes are predictable, healthy and demand professional respect. (1)

Figure 8.1 presents a list of do's and don'ts when dealing with the media.

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Printers, photographers, vendors and others involved in producing and distributing public relations campaign materials often have preconceived notions about what should be done. Public relations professionals need to know how to accurately share information with others, if a public relations activity is to be implemented on schedule as planned.

Students can gain an appreciation for various vendor perspectives by designing a campaign and interviewing area vendors who can provide appropriate professional services. Based on these interviews, students can prepare lists of expectations and information required from each vendor. Students can discuss these different lists in terms of their emphasis on deadlines, detailed specifications, turn-around times, fees and costs. The discussion should focus on what the public relations practitioner needs to know in advance before approaching professional vendors.

Not only do public relations practitioners need to know and respect different professional perspectives--especially the media's--but also, executives and corporate officials who may be interviewed by the media need to be sensitive to these other perspectives and should be trained so that they know what to expect from and how to work with media professionals.

Figure 8.2 lists certain basic "ground rules" for executives being interviewed, which can be used by students role-playing reporters and executives in interviewing situations.

The following classroom exercises can help students better understand the process and function of effective publicity and media relations.

Have students plan a media kit:

1. From the point of view of the public relations person: Students should--individually or in small groups--plan out the purposes of a media kit and from that derive what the contents should be. Discuss: Why are we producing a media kit? What will it accomplish for us? Are these consistent with the overall purposes and budget of our public relations program or campaign? What kinds of information and stories do we want to get into the media? What illustrations would we like to see in the media? Which specific kinds of media-kit items would help us achieve our public relations purposes?

2. From the media person's point of view:
Having given the students one or more scenarios for different types of special events or announcements the students as reporters would be convering, they should be asked to make lists of what kinds of information they think they should have to do a good job on their reporting assignments. What specific things and kinds of information would they want to find in a media kit? What kinds of story angles? Localizations? Human-

interest angles? They should be encouraged to develop ideas for feature stories and then specify what, in a media kit, would help them do the feature stories.

Have students interview a public relations person who has a formal role preparing media kits. Have students interview a practicing journalist who has experience dealing with publicity materials and media kits. Find out what these two professional points of view are toward the usefulness of various items in a standard media kit, such as just-the-facts information sheets, opening statements, feature stories, suggested news angles and story ideas, list of photo opportunities, art and graphics.

Have students survey public relations sources. Questionnaires focused on the topic of publicity and media relations can be developed and distributed to local public relations departments and agencies. Sample questions: What are effective ways to plan and produce media kits? What factors are considered? How are costs determined? What kinds of approaches have worked? What has not worked--and why? Students also can collect actual media kits from these sources, critique them in class and use them as models for student-produced media kits.

Have students survey journalists. Construct a questionnaire to be administered by students to find area reporters' and editors' views on public relations publicity and media relations. From their perspective, what works and what doesn't work--and why? Compare the students' survey results with recent published polls of public relations and media professionals. (2)

Have students prepare a media kit:

1. Write a cover letter for the media kit. Signed by an appropriate senior-level official of the sponsoring organization, the letter should contain the following: a greeting or welcome, statement of the significance of the occasion warranting the media kit, an indication of what may be gained from the occasion, expression of a wish to help the media people do their job, and some kind of offer of further information and help. Such a letter should be as brief and to-the-point as possible, and no more than one page. It should be perfect in letter form, grammar and spelling.

2. Write an opening statement to be read by an appropriate official from the sponsoring organization. It should include a greeting or welcome, a statement of what the special event will be and why it's being held, its significance, what may be gained from it, its historical context, and a restatement of the organization's pleasure in sponsoring the event and having attendees present for the media announcement.

3. Write basic news releases for the media kit which could be published or broadcast as is, without editing or modification by the media. Students should prepare releases for both print and broadcast media. Basic public relations and newswriting textbooks give detailed information about writing press releases. (3)

Have students prepare lists of local and national media, complete with names of current editors, phone numbers, mailing addresses, to which student-produced media kits could be sent. The list should contain deadlines, copy requirements and other information appropriate for each media outlet. The students can ask local public relations agencies and departments for their media lists and sources they use to collect this information. There are a number of media directories which the students may use to prepare these media lists. (4)

Also using student-produced media kits, students can prepare for and conduct mock press conferences. Students can be assigned specific roles to perform: reporters, corporate officials, and public relations practitioners. The press conferences can be videotaped and critiqued in class. Figure 8.3 is a checklist for preparing for and conducting a press conference.

FIGURE 8.1: Do's and Don'ts For Effective Publicity and Media Relations.

DO... give news people accurate, meaningful, thorough, official, easy-to-locate and useful information. Media people want the traditional questions--of who, what, where, when, why and how--answered.

DON'T... lie or try to hide unfavorable information. In the long run, this is counterproductive. Being caught in a lie is a death sentence for a public relations person's credibility and will likely render a media kit useless.

DO... send media kits to all appropriate media professionals, including those likely to attend any special event or press conference--and, especially, to those who are not likely to attend.

DON'T... overwhelm the media with too much information. Most media professionals believe there is too much paper in their lives, and there probably is. All media kits should provide only those things that will advance the public relations purpose while maximally helping the media professional. Lean media kits are appreciated--and easier to produce, too.

DO... find out what the media professionals want and get that information to them accurately and on time.

FIGURE 8.2: Ground rules for executives being interviewed.*

1. Know the topic you are to discuss.
2. Anticipate touchy questions.
3. Be completely honest.
4. Answer questions directly. If you cannot answer the question, say you cannot.
5. If you don't know an answer, say so and offer to get an answer. Follow up on this offer.
6. Keep the meeting as cordial as possible, even in the face of bantering and pushing.
7. Avoid off-the-record remarks.
8. Be sure to answer all questions that are public record or not against company policy.
9. Use the personality that helped get you into the top-level position you are in--be natural--and look professional.
10. Offer to help later if a reporter would like that help.

* For more how-to-do-it lists, see This is PR by Newsom and Scott (1985).

FIGURE 8.3: Checklist for conducting a press conference

PRIOR TO THE PRESS CONFERENCE

1. Determine the actual need, specific goals, time schedule, location, and target audiences, specifically the pertinent media people who should attend.

2. Set time of conference for either a.m. or p.m. media deadlines on TV, radio and print media. If morning press conference, set up refreshments, lunch, etc.; if afternoon, set up for possible cocktails, etc.

3. Find out what special facilities media may need and make arrangements. Check for lighting, sound levels, electric outlets, etc.

4. Draft final guest-acceptance list.

5. Complete media kits, including speeches, bios, and photos, with event timing indicated for broadcast media.

6. Prepare media, guest and host badges.

7. Prepare contingency plans for late arrivals of speakers, missing media kits, power failures, etc.

8. Plan cleaning of site and arrange for any special decorations; remember to put out logos, displays, etc.

9. Be sure catered services understand order and timing.

DAY OF THE PRESS CONFERENCE

10. Recheck press conference area to be sure all supplies and equipment in place and operational.

11. Have ready badges for media, guests and hosts.

12. Check food preparation, delivery and service.

13. Meet with media and distribute media kits.

14. Make video or audio tape of the press conference for internal use: follow-up, clarification, debriefing, etc.

15. Prepare list of media representatives in attendance.

AFTER THE PRESS CONFERENCE

16. Send follow-up letters.

17. Monitor media for coverage.

18. Debrief public relations staff and others about what worked and what did not work at press conference.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Aligning values of practitioners and journalists," L.L. Kopenhaver, Public Relations Review, Summer, 1986. "Can we talk? Executives and reporters must meet halfway," Washington Journalism Review, July, 1986. "Business and journalism: bedfellows or mortal enemies?" Business Horizons, Sept./Oct. 1985.

2. "Views on the news," W. Schneidner and I.A. Lewis, Public Opinion Aug./Sept. 1985. "What do reporters think of you?" S. K. Stegall, Currents, July/August 1985.

3. Writing for the Mass Media, J. G. Stovall (Englewood Cliffs: Prentiss-Hall) 1986; Public Relations Writing: Form & Style, D. Newsom and B. Carrell, (Belmont: Wadsworth) 2nd edition, 1986.

4. "What every publicist should know about media directories," Richard Weiner, Public Relations Quarterly, Summer, 1985. One example of such a media directory is Working Press of the Nation, published annually by the National Research Bureau, Chicago, Illinois.